

Naturalists Come From Three States to Roan Mountain Each Spring

By Jennifer Bauer

Each year, during the first full weekend in May, naturalists from Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia, gather in Roan Mountain, Tennessee, to welcome the changing season and the opportunity to explore the unique habitats of the Roan.

This year's event, set for May 4-6, 2007, will mark the 49th year of the Roan Mountain Spring Naturalist's Rally.

The idea of organizing a naturalist's rally was the brainstorm of Fred W. Behrend, who was born in Germany in 1896 and came to New York in 1926. An Elizabethton corporation, the Bemberg Company, was advertising for a German-English stenographer; a perfect fit for Freddie, as his friends and co-workers knew him. Landing this new position brought him to Carter County, where he ultimately contributed to the community and its citizens in many ways.



Photo Courtesy of Jennifer Bauer

One visit to the Appalachian mountain region is all it takes to capture a person's heart and imagination. Fred Behrend became an avid, knowledgeable naturalist, observing and understanding birds, animals, and wildflowers throughout the mountainous elevations.

He learned that the Great Smoky Mountains National Park held an annual Wildflower Pilgrimage and was then inspired to begin a similar event on and around Roan Mountain. His daughter Linda wrote a beautiful story about her father in the Winter 2004 issue of the Friends of Roan Mountain newsletter. When he decided a gathering of this kind should be planned, he said: "We have just as many wildflowers at Roan Mountain and a greater variety because of the difference in elevation."

Thus, in 1958, the first Carter County Wildflower Tours and Bird Walks were born. Freddie's idea immediately generated a long list of supporters and folks eager to assist in this new venture. Notable naturalists and biologists such as Dr. Herman O'Dell and Dr. Frank Barclay from East Tennessee State University gave their support, along with Tom and Alma Gray; Lee Herndon; Jim and Edna Potter; and Bill and Marjorie Dyer. They held their first meeting at the old Lynnwood Hotel in Johnson City and laid the groundwork for what has become an annual event.

Along with scheduling field trips and naturalist guided tours, several traditions began the first year of the event. Alma Gray prepared a warm drink from the plant, New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*), also known as Redroot. The leaves of this small, deciduous shrub were used to prepare the drink; historically, tea made from the root had been used by the Cherokee for toothache and digestive problems. Jim and Edna Potter assisted in many ways in the planning and were remembered for joining Tom Gray at the Twin Spring picnic area to prepare logger's coffee for folks out during the cool mornings.

The trip leaders and their visitors would meet on Saturday morning at the Roan Mountain Motel on the main highway through town. Leaders stood in the parking lot with signs held high, indicating the name of their field trip. Inside, the motel staff would have bag lunches ready for hikers to pick up before their day long excursion into the mountains.

One couldn't argue with the decision to hold such an event here, for the Roan offers unique and diverse habitats, worthy of research and exploration. It is along the highlands of the Roan where explorers have visited and botanized since the British first colonized our country. Reaching a height of 6,285 feet at its highest summit, the Roan hosts many rare and endangered plant species, along with providing specialized habitat to birds and small mammals.

Often referred to as a "Canadian" zone, the high elevation of this mountain boasts a forest of Red Spruce and Fraser Fir, open grass balds, and many species more commonly found north of the United States. It is not uncommon to see unexpected species of birds flying over or passing through Carver's Gap at the North Carolina/Tennessee State line. In the summer, the annual butterfly count evokes the hope that the highest count of Aphrodite Fritillaries will be found nectaring on the clover along the roadsides. Every season on the Roan gives hope of a new surprise, a new flower, a new species.

Roan Mountain is one of the most remarkable places on our continent and it is a fitting location for an annual gathering of naturalists. As the spring rally moves into its 49th year, it is a humbling to realize that this event, and its sister event, the Roan Mountain Fall Naturalists Rally that started in 1962, have been kept alive all of these years by volunteers and folks who truly love the Roan.

In its early years, people from many walks of life would come together, form committees, and do the work necessary to provide an inspirational and educational spring weekend. Along with the help of the Elizabethton/Carter County Chamber of Commerce, the spring rallies continued to grow and prosper.

Roan Mountain State Park took over the organization and financial needs of the spring rally in 1993 until the forming of the Friends of Roan Mountain. The Friends are an organization dedicated to "fostering great awareness and understanding of the

natural, historical, and cultural significance of Roan Mountain.” Interpretation, education, and activities that support this mission are all a part of the backbone of this organization. Beginning in 2002, the Friends of Roan Mountain began sponsorship of the event, along with assistance from the state park.

A full weekend of interpretive activities is planned, beginning on Friday evening with a dinner and guest speaker. The Saturday schedule includes several guided hikes and tours that begin at 8:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Midday, a lunchtime workshop is offered and Saturday evening, a tasty meal and guest speaker greet the weary hikers. There is always a Saturday night surprise trip, often taking folks out to explore the night sky, or possibly search for one or more owl species calling in the spring. Sunday continues with additional tours at 8:30 a.m. and at 2 p.m.

There are always many choices of field trips through the two days, which are led by local naturalists, college professors, and individuals who are experts in their field of interest and study. You can expect to find bird and wildflower trips, in addition to ecology, salamanders, historical tours, animal tracks and signs, mushrooms, geology, stream ecology, butterflies, and more.

The 2007 weekend will be welcoming two wonderful speakers. On Friday night, the Friends of Roan will be hosting Dr. Pete Lemiszki, who will be presenting a talk entitled, “Rummaging in the Basement of the Appalachian Mountains: Appraising the rocks for rare clues about the geologic history of the Roan Mountain area.” Dr. Lemiszki is the chief geologist for the Tennessee Division of Geology in the Knoxville Field Office and the author of the Tennessee Division of Geology State Park Series #3, Geology of Roan Mountain State Park.

Dr. Lemiszki’s talk will discuss the bedrock geology of the park and surrounding area, focusing on the various rock types, iron deposits, absolute and relative age of the bedrock formations, and geologic structures, such as faults and folds. In addition, the park geology will be explored in a regional context with respect to the growth of the Appalachian Mountain range and the development of a much older mountain range called the Grenville Mountains.

Saturday evening, Dr. Jay Franklin, assistant professor archaeology at East Tennessee State University, will speak on “Cave Archaeology in Southern Appalachia.” Dr. Franklin’s primary areas of research are prehistoric archaeology of the Southeastern United States, karst (cave and rock shelter) archaeology of the Southern Appalachians, stone tool technologies, and material culture.

Franklin’s research has taken him to many places, including the Upper Cumberland Plateau, where he has conducted archaeological surveys for nearly 10 years. His initial interest involved investigations of a deep cave site, 3rd Unnamed Cave. He has excavated and surveyed rock shelters in this region and documented bedrock mortar-hole sites where aboriginal peoples ground and processed nut mast. In addition, he has been conducting surveys to determine the distribution of cave and rock art sites in the region.

Whether or not you have visited Roan Mountain before, you can be sure that a weekend at the Roan Mountain Spring Naturalists Rally will be one you will not want to miss! It is a time when new friends are made, and old friends reunite, for a memorable and educational weekend in an awe-inspiring environment.

For additional information on this event, please contact the spring rally director, Jennifer Bauer, at 423-543-5808 and request a brochure detailing all of the weekend events.

If you would like to learn more about the Friends of Roan Mountain, log on to www.etsu.edu/biology/roan-mtn

(Jennifer Bauer is park manager of Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area and the Carter Mansion in Elizabethton. For 21 years she worked at Roan Mountain State Park as a park interpretive specialist. She is the author of A Naturalist’s Teaching Manual; Roan Mountain: A Passage of Time; and Wildlife, Wildflowers, and Wild Activities: Exploring Southern Appalachia. She is director of the Spring Roan Mountain Naturalists’ Rally, sponsored by the Friends of Roan Mountain.)